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## THE EARLY REIGN OF MITHRADATES II THE GREAT IN PARTHIA

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Mithradates II (122–88/87 B.C.) is among the greatest Parthian kings, and because of his attainments, some ancient accounts call him “the Great.”<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, sources supply little information about his achievements, especially for his policies in the east, i.e., on the frontiers of Iran and in Central Asia. Accounts refer to Parthia’s adversaries there under the general term of *Scythae/Skythai* or *Guti*. Specific names and locations are few.<sup>2</sup>

According to Iustinus’ (42.2.3) explicit information, Mithradates II rose to the throne after the unexpected death of his paternal uncle Artabanos I. Although Artabanos I had died fighting nomads (Tochari), the Parthian state passed to Mithradates II without much disruption.<sup>3</sup>

A hypothesis has recently been put forward that Artabanos I was immediately succeeded by one Arsakes X, a hypothetical son of Artabanos I, to whom should be attributed type S23 coins with the legend ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ.<sup>4</sup> The title ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ had not previously ap-

<sup>1</sup> Iust. 42.2.3: *Mithridates (...) cui res gestae Magni cognomen dedere; quippe claritatem parentum aemulatione virtutis accensus animi magnitudine supergreditur.*

<sup>2</sup> On Mithradates II, see Debevoise 1938, 40–50; Wolski 1980; 1993, 88–96; Olbrycht 1998, 96–104; Olbrycht 2009; Olbrycht 2011. The first comprehensive analysis of Mithradates II’s eastern policies was made by Daffinà 1967, 69–75.

<sup>3</sup> On the Tochari, see Enoki, Koshelenko, Haidary 1994, and Piankov, ‘The Tochari’ in this volume.

<sup>4</sup> Assar 2006, 129–134. Coin types are cited according to the catalogue by Sellwood 1980 (=S).

peared on Arsakid coinage, but was regularly used on coins of Mithradates II (S24.1, S27.1, S28). Similarly, the mint magistrate marks TY on tetradrachms S23 are identical with those on coins S24.4 and S24.6–7 which were certainly issued by Mithradates II. Such circumstantial evidence speaks for attributing type S23, including tetradrachms, to Mithradates II. Yet the image on S23 tetradrachms is somewhat different from that on type S24 coins: the obverse shows a relatively young, short-bearded king. In contrast, the characteristic image of Mithradates II is a bust of a man with a long beard. Precisely such portraits are seen on S23 bronzes from Seleukia on the Tigris dated at the year 191 of the Seleukid era (Macedonian style; 122/121 B.C.): the king is wearing a fairly long beard and moustache.<sup>5</sup> This, no doubt, is a picture of Mithradates II. The bronzes began to be issued in fall 122, i.e., at the outset of Mithradates II's reign.

Despite the difference in portraiture, type S23 coins, including tetradrachms, should be thought to have been issued by Mithradates II. The difference probably stems from the fact that this king, in the difficult moments immediately following Artabanos I's sudden death, had not yet had time to define his own iconography (the images on tetradrachms S23 stylistically resemble those on coins of Phraates II). Mithradates was probably accompanying the Parthian army engaged in the far east, in Baktria, when circumstances forced him to assume power. However, Mithradates II quickly developed his own uniform style and had images made which depicted him with a long beard. This style included fewer Greco-Macedonian elements than was the case with Phraates II.

Mithradates II's first monetary issues include, next to other denominations, tetradrachms (S23–24) which, in Parthian coinage, were issued predominantly in Seleukeia on the Tigris (in isolated cases also in Susa).<sup>6</sup> Tetradrachms produced in Seleukeia on the Tigris, which circulated only in the western parts of the empire, were usually initiated by the kings themselves, for it was they that supervised royal monetary supply. When the king departed from Babylonia and Media for an extended leave, tetradrachms were not normally issued, or if they were, it was only sporadically so. Based on this circumstance, it may be surmised that in his first years on the throne, Mithradates II devoted much attention to western satrapies, especially to Babylonia. But this does not mean that he ignored prob-

<sup>5</sup> S23.4: Le Rider 1965, 387–388, pls. LXXI.12–14.

<sup>6</sup> It was McDowell 1935, 158–177 who first pointed out that Parthian tetradrachms were only struck at Seleukia on the Tigris. Exceptions are some issues of Phraates II at Susa (Le Rider 1965, 79–80, pl. X, A–B), and of Artabanos I (Simonetta 1975, 151–156). See also Mørkholm 1980, 34. Sellwood (1980, 65–66) ascribes type S23 solely to western Parthian mints (Seleukia, Susa, Ekbatana, and perhaps Niniveh).

lems in Central Asian fringes of the empire. Iranian mints turning out types S23 and S24 worked strenuously. In the early years of his reign, Mithradates II resided primarily in Media and fought in eastern Iran as well as in Baktria, but it is not impossible that he also spent some time in Babylonia, then plagued by Arab looting raids. Following types S23 and S24, the king's ample issues (S25–29) did not include tetradrachms; rather, their chief denomination was the drachm which circulated especially in Iran.<sup>7</sup>

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The British Museum keeps a drachm of Mithradates II with the legend ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ.<sup>8</sup> On the obverse, the monogram is an M turned 90 degrees right. This is probably short for ΜΑΡΓΙΑΝΗ, indicating the place of issue (some numismatists associate the monogram with the fortress of Mithradatkirt/Old Nisa which seems improbable). The supposition is confirmed by a stylistic similarity between the reverses of a S22.4 drachm of Artabanos I, showing the obverse monogram ΜΑΡ (= ΜΑΡΓΙΑΝΗ), and the Mithradates II's coin S23.3 mentioned above.<sup>9</sup> Thus, on his early drachms issued in Margiana, Mithradates II used the title *philhellen* (φιλέλλην), which had appeared under Mithradates I after a conquest of Babylonia, but later remained unused until on coins of Artabanos I (S21.1–3). Later types of Mithradates' coins only sporadically bear the title φιλέλλην. Exceptions include S27.6–8 tetrachalkoi produced after 111/110 B.C. The title φιλέλλην reappears regularly on S29 coins which were the last type of drachms issued by Mithradates II. Introducing the title φιλέλλην on type S23 coins involved abandoning that of μέγας (just as for Artabanos in type S22).

The use of the title φιλέλλην on coins produced in Margiana was designed to enlist the support of Greeks and Macedonians inhabiting north-eastern satrapies of the empire, including the Merv oasis,<sup>10</sup> and Greek centers in Baktria. But another potential target group of such propaganda were soldiers of Antiochus VII: Greeks and Macedonians fighting alongside nomads who had betrayed the Parthians ca. 127, thus contributing to the defeat and death of Phraates II (Iust. 42.1.4–5). Those Hellenes formerly in Phraates II's army were probably seeking a chance to return to Syria or at least to settle in a safe city under Arsakid control. It

<sup>7</sup> It cannot be ruled out that Mithradates II, like Mithradates I and Phraates II before him, briefly issued drachms also in Seleukia – Simonetta 1979, 363–4; Assar 2006, 135.

<sup>8</sup> S23.3; BM, inv. no. 1920–6–11–314.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Loginov, Nikitin 1996, 40–44, fig. 1, nos. 5 and 6; Nikitin 1998, 14–15, 18, pl. I.3–4.

<sup>10</sup> Loginov, Nikitin 1996.

is doubtful that they could lead peaceful lives on Baktria's or Sogdiana's territories under nomad rule.

During his first decade as king, Mithradates II used titulature little different from that of his predecessors. His coins display the titles ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ. What is innovative is the title ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ – of the “Manifest.” Almost identical titulature is known from inscriptions from the time of Mithradates II.

One inscription, found at Babylon and stored in the British Museum, was made in the year 191 of the Seleukid era (Macedonian style), or between Oct. 7, 122 and Sept. 25, 121 B.C. It opens with the following titles: “*Of the Great King Arsakes, the Manifest and the Philhellene*”:

[Βασιλεύον]τος Μεγάλου Ἀρσάκου[υ | Ἐπιφανοῦ]ς Φιλέλληνης (...)<sup>11</sup>

What with the absence of the title *Theopatoros*, which was frequently used on Artabanos I's coins, and the use of the epithet *Epiphanes*, the inscription should be attributed to Mithradates II.

Another inscription, found at Babylon, is doubly dated at the year 202 of the Seleukid era (Macedonian style) or 137 of the Arsakid era (= Oct. 6, 111 – Sept. 24, 110 B.C.). This poorly preserved inscription cites identical titulature as the previous one – “*Of the (Great) King (Arsakes), the Manifest and the Philhellene*”.

[Βα]σιλεύοντος [Μεγάλου Ἀρσάκου] | Ἐπιφανοῦς Φιλέλληνης (...)<sup>12</sup>

Both texts include the title *philhellen*, a gesture toward Hellenes. On coins of Mithradates II, this title appears relatively rarely, in issues from very early and very late in his reign.

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Following Artabanos I's and his generals' attacks on Charakene and Elymais, the situation in southwestern regions of the Arsakid empire was relatively stable. In Charakene, after Hyspaosines died in June 124, coins were still produced in his name.<sup>13</sup> We know of posthumous tetradrachms dated 190, 191, and 192 of the Seleukid era (Macedonian style) with legends ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΥΣΠΙΔΟΣΙΝΟΥ.<sup>14</sup> It seems that such issues were made with the consent of the Parthians, who deliberately left their vassals a large degree of freedom.<sup>15</sup> The

<sup>11</sup> Haussoullier 1909, 353–354; Minns 1915, 36; SEG VII 40; Le Rider, 1965, 37–38; Canali De Rossi 2004, no. 106.

<sup>12</sup> Haussoullier 1909, 352–353; Minns 1915, 36; SEG VII 39; Le Rider, 1965, 37; Canali De Rossi 2004, no. 107.

<sup>13</sup> See Schuol 2000, 294–300. Cf. Newell 1925; Bellinger 1942; 1944.

<sup>14</sup> Such coins were discovered in a 1998/1999 hoard together with pieces of Mithradates II. No coins later than S24 tetradrachms were present in the hoard (Assar 2006, 133–134).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Bernard 1990, 41–43.

year 121/120 B.C. saw issues of Mithradates II struck from dies of type S23.4 on bronzes of Hyspaosines dated 191 SEM.<sup>16</sup> This procedure is often thought to be proof of a vassal status of Charakene/Mesene under the Arsakids.<sup>17</sup> But overstriking was a natural process at a time when monetary circulation in Babylonia was stabilizing under Mithradates II. After Hyspaosines' death, the domain did not have a strong leader, and the memory must have lived of Artabanos I's military overwhelming might in 126–125 B.C. Under the circumstances, the vassal status of Charakene was unquestionable.

Meanwhile, Babylonia continued to be harassed by Arabs who plundered the country almost on a yearly basis. The story is told in a Babylonian document from the month of Nisan (Apr. 20 – May 19) 120 B.C.:<sup>18</sup>

A<sub>2</sub>15: ..... That month, there was [...] in Babylon.

A<sub>2</sub>16: [That month, I hea]rd that the general who was above [the four generals from] Babylon] entered Seleukia

A<sub>2</sub>17: [which is on] the Tigris. [...] this [gener]al (who) before

A<sub>2</sub>18: [...] was appointed as general in [...]

A<sub>2</sub>19: [...] and] his [troo]ps? went out to Media [to the side of] King [Arsak]es.....

B<sub>1</sub>13: [...] That [month], plundering by the Arabs in Babylonia [...]

The text seems to imply that the Parthian commander-in-chief in the west, i.e., “the general who was above the four generals,” traveled from Seleukeia on the Tigris to Media to see the king. Apparently, the king residing in Media was gathering his forces to deal with nomads in the east, but repeated plunder in Babylonia troubled him greatly. Arabs were a troublesome enemy, but their raids were not meant to separate Babylonia from Parthia. This allowed Mithradates to dispatch his main force to the east, entrusting defense from the Arabs to Babylon's commander-in-chief.

Another diary from the month of Ayyar (May 20 – June 17, 120 B.C.) supplies more specific details:<sup>19</sup>

C11':..... That month, the 4<sup>th</sup>, a leather document of the king which was written to the governor of Babylon and the (Greek) citizens who are in Babylon [...]

C12': [...] ]na, son of Bagaya'aša who was above the 4 generals, and Urrahšu, the general, [were removed?] from the (position) of general [...].<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Newell 1925, 11–18.

<sup>17</sup> Debevoise 1938, 40; Le Rider 1965, 387–388.

<sup>18</sup> Sachs, Hunger 1996, no. –119A<sub>2</sub>+B<sub>1</sub>, p. 311; Del Monte 1997, 147.

<sup>19</sup> Sachs, Hunger 1996, no. –119C, p. 313; Del Monte 1997, 148.

<sup>20</sup> Regarding line C12, Sachs, Hunger 1996, 314 comment that the text is to be restored “were removed from the position of general”.

The reference, therefore, is to two senior officers, one, the son of Bagaya'aša "who was above the four generals," and Urrahšu, the general. They were probably dismissed and the decision was officially announced. The first commander was honored by his patronymic *son of Bagaya'aša*.<sup>21</sup> The official *Bagaya'aša* was a familiar figure in Babylonia since he played a key role in Parthian politics from ca. 148/7 B.C., when he became satrap of Media, to the 130's<sup>22</sup>. That his son held a high office after him implies that offices in Parthia had effectively become hereditary.

In spring 119 (month Nisan = April 9 – May 8), Parthian forces intervened in Babylonia successfully enough to ensure that Arab attacks ceased for a time. This is mentioned in an astronomical diary:<sup>23</sup>

A19 (...) the troops which [...]

A20 [...] Borsippa .... Went to Borsippa. The 13<sup>th</sup>, [he] entered Babylon from Borsippa. The 18<sup>th</sup>, .... [...] new canal [...]

A21 [... ] 10 days he removed his camp there. The 25<sup>th</sup>, when he withdrew, he did not enter Babylon. In the temple of Nergal .... Which is below the temple? [...]

A22 [...] of the Arabs went out. The people went out from Babylon to the rivers and fields which were without Arabs.

It is not certain who commanded the Parthian army – whether the king or a satrapal commander. Characteristically, the Parthian force fighting the Arabs did not enter Babylon, but probably immediately departed for Media. Apparently the force was in a hurry to join the fray in the empire's east. Meanwhile, the defeated Arabs had left and Babylonia's situation improved. Although Babylonian accounts have extensive gaps in them,<sup>24</sup> it still seems that Arab raids after 119 (when they attacked again in fall) were rather sporadic.<sup>25</sup> Overall, Babylonia entered in the decade 119–111 B.C. a much more peaceful phase than the tumultuous 120's, when it was under attack from Seleukids, Charakene, Arabs, and even Sakan hosts.

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<sup>21</sup> Assar 2006, 138 conjectures the name Artabanos for the person in question and maintains that the patronymic was used to distinguish that Artabanos from another who was the young King Arsakes X, who "probably perished in some tragic circumstances barely a year earlier while defending his realm." Yet Arsakes X – Artabanos is a purely hypothetical figure. Likewise, the reconstruction of the name Artabanos in the diary is not plausible.

<sup>22</sup> Del Monte 1997, 55–57; Olbrycht 2010, 238–239.

<sup>23</sup> Sachs, Hunger 1996, 320–321, no. –118A, Obv'; Del Monte 1997, 149.

<sup>24</sup> Sachs, Hunger 1996, 328–347.

<sup>25</sup> An Arab raid was repulsed in the month Ab of 200 SEB = July, 20 – Aug. 18, 112 B.C. Cf. Sachs, Hunger 1996, 342–343, no. –111B.

In 121–119 B.C., Mithradates II concentrated on the empire's east. His military efforts culminated in struggles in fall 119 during which the Parthians routed a host of the “*Guti*,” i.e., Tochari, in Baktria. A recently published Babylonian text supplies some valuable details on the subject:<sup>26</sup>

A18: ... That [month], the 15<sup>th</sup>, a leather document of King Arsakes

A19: [which] was written to the governor of Babylon and the (Greek) citizens who were in Babylon, was read in the House of Observation; accordingly, many troops assembled and went to fight against the son of the king and his troops of the [remote] cities

A20: [of the G]utian (country) who killed my brother Artaban, and I set up (troops) opposite them, and fought with them; a great killing I performed among them; except two men [...]

A21: [...] were not killed; and the crown prince and his troops fled from the fight and withdrew to the difficult mountains. That month, the general who is above the four generals for damming?

A22: [...] .... departed. That month, the Arabs became hostile, as before, and plundered. That month, King Arsakes [went] to the remote cities of the Gutian country in order to fight.

The struggle was fought in month Tashrit (Oct. 4 – Nov. 2, 119 B.C.) on a grand scale. Characteristically, the text speaks of “remote cities of the Gutian country” and of “difficult mountains.” The reference is no doubt to Baktria, a highly urbanized country, where the Tochari had their bases. It was not for no reason that Baktria was widely called the “land with a thousand cities” (Strab. 15.1.3; Iust. 41.1.8; 41.4.5).<sup>27</sup> All around Baktrian plains extend mighty mountain ranges of the Hindukush and the Hissar, with summits reaching 7000 meters above sea level. Driven back by Parthian thrusts, the “son of the king” of the Guti fled into the mountains. The Tochari probably withdrew from the cities and plains into the Hissar Mountains in Baktrian northern fringes and on its frontier with Sogdiana. The fleeing troops were pursued by “Arsakes” himself, at the head of his force. It seems that battles must have been fought not only in Baktria proper, but also in its neighboring Sogdiana, where the Tochari or their allies might flee.

The text tells of Artabanos, apparently a “brother” of Arsakes killed by the Guti. Does this refer to king Artabanos I (127–122) or perhaps to someone else?

<sup>26</sup> Sachs, Hunger 1996, 326–327, no. –118A; Del Monte 1997, 149–150.

<sup>27</sup> The same phrase is used in some recent publications, see Masson 1982 (*Das Land der tausend Städte*); Leriche 2007 (*Bactria, Land of a Thousand Cities*).



Iustinus (42.2.2–3) says that Artabanos I was an uncle of Phraates II (*patruus*, father's brother, paternal uncle). Mithradates II is for the historian a son (*filius*) of Artabanos I. If Mithradates II were a son of Phriapatios, i.e., brother of Artabanos I, he would be at least 50 years old in 119 since Phriapatios died no later than ca. 170 B.C.<sup>28</sup> While not impossible, it is historically unlikely since Mithradates II's natural contestants for the throne would have been the sons of Phraates II and Mithradates I. On his coins, Mithradates II dispenses with the title *Theopatoros* (ΘΕΟΠΑΤΟΡΟΣ), as opposed to Mithradates I (S10.17) and Artabanos I (S19), who undoubtedly were sons of Phriapatios. All these circumstances imply that Mithradates II was not a son of Phriapatios, but of Artabanos I. In this case, the Artabanos from the Babylonian text was not king Artabanos I, but Mithradates II's brother, a senior official who died in combat. Notably, he is not called king in the text.<sup>29</sup>

Most of our information about Mithradates II's eastern policy comes from Iustinus (42.2.4–5): *Multa igitur bella cum finitimis magna virtute gessit multosque populos Parthico regno addidit. Sed et cum Scythis prospere aliquotiens dimicavit ultorque iniuriae parentum fuit.* Although laconic, this report contains many important details. According to Iustinus 42.2.5, Mithradates II became an avenger of his parents or ancestors – *ultor iniuriae parentum* – if so, he must have engaged mainly the Tochari with whom his father Artabanos I had fought. Iustinus' evidence leaves no doubt that Mithradates II's campaigns were successful and resulted in the subjugation of many areas.

In his brief description of the Parthian-Baktrian conflict, Strabo 11.9.2 says that the Parthians “*also took a part of Baktriana, having forced the Skythians, and still earlier Eukratides and his followers, to yield to them*”.<sup>30</sup> The mention refers to the situation in the aftermath of the fall of Eukratides' successors and after a short-lived occupation of Baktria by *Skythians*, i.e. nomads. This must be a reference to the time of Mithradates II as he was the one who defeated the “Skythians” and reconquered Baktria. Strabo emphasizes that Skythians were forced to recognize Parthian rule and he adds on the same breath that the vastness of the Parthian empire equaled that of Rome.

Study of Parthian coin finds and of what fragmentary source evidence is available may lead to the conclusion that Parthian dominion in Baktria indeed extended to Baktra/Zariaspa (Balkh), Kampyrtepa, and Termez. Mithradates II

<sup>28</sup> Assar 2006, 88.

<sup>29</sup> Assar 2006, 138 believes that the reference might be to the Artabanos who was relieved of his command in 120. Perhaps he was killed fighting the Guti. But then he should be called the brother of the king, like Bagaya'aša in 133 B.C. (Del Monte 1997, 125). Yet the description used for him was “son of Bagaya'aša”.

<sup>30</sup> ἀφείλοντο δὲ καὶ τῆς Βακτριανῆς μέρος βιάσάμενοι τοὺς Σκύθας καὶ ἔτι πρότερον τοὺς περὶ Εὐκρατίδαν.



recaptured what had been conquered by his great namesake in between 163 and 155.<sup>31</sup> Arsakid coins appear in western Baktria and in the middle Amu Darya region until the time of Gotarzes II (died 51 A.D.).<sup>32</sup>

It was essential for the Parthians to control the middle Amu Darya area including Amol in order that they might forestall any attempted attacks by nomads from Transoxiana, especially from Sogdiana. For more than two centuries, up until the Kushan era in the latter half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D., no major threats to Parthian rule visited this area. The Parthians are certain to have occasionally ventured as far as Transoxiana, whether into northern Baktria or Sogdiana, and especially into the Bukhara region. There is no question that for a time, Khalchayan in the Surkhan Darya valley (northern Baktria) saw not only cultural, but also political influences of the Parthians. The same may be said of western Sogdiana. Chinese records say that Parthia, or Anxi, bordered on the land of Yancai located on the lower Syr Darya and the Aral Sea.<sup>33</sup> A zone of mutual contact between Parthia and Yancai must have been in Sogdiana. Control over the strategic route Samarkand – Bukhara – Merv was a necessity for the Parthians if they had any understanding of elementary military and political strategy to ensure the Arsakid empire security on its north-eastern frontiers. The region of the middle Amu Darya was probably called Traxiane.<sup>34</sup>

In Transoxiana settled vast numbers of steppe people during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries B.C. Their burial places were located, among other places, on the middle Amu Darya itself, as is shown by the Babashov necropolis, and on the Zerafshan river. Sogdiana and the middle Amu Darya area was inhabited by Sakai and Sakaraukai,<sup>35</sup> who for a time posed a grave threat to Parthian hegemony.

From the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C., in the province now called Sistan (Sīstān) in eastern Iran and south-western Afghanistan, there were powerful Sakan domains, as monetary evidence clearly demonstrates.<sup>36</sup> Yet coins suffer from many limitations as source material to reconstruct political events. In this case, it applies in particular to early Sakan presence in Sakastan, i.e., in Drangiana and the land of

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<sup>31</sup> For details, see Olbrycht 2010.

<sup>32</sup> Coins of Mithradates II were discovered in Tillya-tepe (S27.3), Mazār-e Sharīf and in Old Termez, see Rtveladze 1992, 33; 1994, 87. On Parthian coin finds in Baktria and in the middle Amu Darya region, see: Pilipko 1976; Koshelenko, Sarianidi 1992; Zeymal 1997; Rtveladze 2000; Biriukov 2010; Litvinskii 2010. The most recent treatment is Gorin, 'Parthian Coins from Kampyrtepa' (in this volume).

<sup>33</sup> SJ 123: Watson 1961, 268; Olbrycht 1998, 101–102. Some scholars presume that Mithradates II was active in Chorasmia and his attacks on the country may have caused the fall of centers like Koi-krylgan-kala, Kalaly-gyr 2, and Giaur (Vainberg 1992, 37). However, archaeological dating in Chorasmia is far from accurate; hence the hypothesis quoted cannot be considered well founded.

<sup>34</sup> Rtveladze 1992, 34.

<sup>35</sup> Olbrycht 1998, 122–123.

<sup>36</sup> Senior 2001.

the Ariasprians. The Sakai appeared there in connection with major nomad migrations and their conquest of Bactria ca. 130–120 B.C. Faced with strong resistance from the Parthians under Artabanos I and Mithradates II, the steppe people probably wended their way south along the Areios (Harirud) and Margos (Morghab). The man who pacified them and included them in the Arsakid empire was certainly Mithradates II.<sup>37</sup> It may be thought that Arsakid rule under Mithradates II reached as far as the eastern frontier of Arachosia, and this status continued throughout the entire 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. In an account by Isidoros of Charax (*Stathmoi*), which chiefly covered the time of Phraates IV (38–3/2 B.C.), Sakastan (like Arachosia) was an important part of Parthian possessions in the east.

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Mithradates II's full involvement in the east coincides with the production of type S24 coins (legend: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ), issued in numerous mints. The type includes tetradrachms from Babylonia, but the output of drachms circulated in Iran rose rapidly. In addition to the old mint in Ekbatana, another mint became highly active in Rhaga near the Caspian Gates.<sup>38</sup> Coins from Rhaga bear monograms usually combining the letters PA, but on occasion a full name of the city appears in Greek, ΡΑΓΑ (S24.15 and 24.16). Coin iconography, which included horses and gorytos, referred to military preparations and operations. Type S24 was in production for probably four years,<sup>39</sup> perhaps in about 120–117 B.C. It became necessary for two large mints to operate in Media because of the extensive needs of the Parthian army and Mithradates II's court. It was Media where the forces chiefly concentrated which would march further east.

It seems that the sporadically confirmed type S25 with the legend ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΣΩΤΗΡΟΣ was produced in parallel with series S24.<sup>40</sup> The reverses showed a Parthian archer. Such coins were produced in Ekbatana and Rhaga (PA monogram). On these coins, for the first time in Parthian coinage, there appeared the title "Saviour" (σωτήρ), which must have referred to propaganda efforts by Mithradates II: the Arsakid presented himself to his subjects as a savior from attacks from steppe peoples. Babylonian accounts

<sup>37</sup> Olbrycht 1998, 96–100. A trophy from the Parthian fight against the Sakai is perhaps a silver, gold-plated ax in the treasury in Old Nisa (Koshelenko 1977, ill. 52, 53). In its shape and style, it is akin to axes seen on Indo-Sakan coins of the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C., see *NPIIN* 948, 951.

<sup>38</sup> Details of the Rhagae mint are given by Nikitin 1983. Dichalkoi and chalkoi of type S24 are the most common coins among Mithradates II's early bronze issues.

<sup>39</sup> Nikitin 1983, 97, bases his supposition on the use of four types of monograms on the reverses of S24 coins.

<sup>40</sup> According to Nikitin 1983, 97, production of S25 preceded S24 issues.

speak of great victories of Mithradates II over the faraway “Guti” people in 119 B.C. Perhaps, therefore, S25 issues were produced about 119 during fights against nomads and after their final defeat.

Mithradates II’s presence in Iran itself and in its north-eastern frontiers is confirmed by the chronologically following type S26 (drachms and bronzes) which was clearly struck for the needs of the army and the court. The output of the Ekbatana and Rhaga mints greatly surpassed that of other sites.<sup>41</sup> Nisa in central Parthia joined the list of major mints since coins began to bear N and NI monograms (S26.19, S 26.27). A significant innovation appears on type S26 coins: on their reverses, the omphalos was replaced with a throne, clearly a curtsy to Iranian tradition. A throne without a back appeared on coins of Arsakes I, but in its place Phriapatios introduced an omphalos, an item subsequently replicated by successors. Coin legends remained typical: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ. New titulature, ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ, appeared on the following type S27. If the use of the title King of Kings in Babylonian texts (ca. 111/110 B.C.) coincided with its appearance on type S27 coins, then production of type S26 continued until ca. 111/110.<sup>42</sup>

That a mint operated in Nisa in Parthia proper has been confirmed by the discovery of a hoard of Parthian coins in Ashkabad, Turkmenistan, a few kilometers away from the sites of Old Nisa and New Nisa, with which the mint can be identified.<sup>43</sup> One more single find is known of a type S27 coin of Mithradates II, from Garry-Kyariz, ca. 55km west of Ashkabad.<sup>44</sup> It seems that Mithradates II tried to stabilize the economy of Parthia proper, hence the activity of the Nisa mint. Another significant fact is that the Parthian archive in Old Nisa fortress contains documents dating, in their vast majority, to the reign of Mithradates II and his successors in the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.<sup>45</sup> It seems, therefore, that he was the one who renovated Old Nisa and showed care for economic figures as part of his efforts to expand his fortresses and other royal sites.

Mithradates II must be accredited with similar actions in Merv. On that location were found several coins of this king. Five coins come from the International Merv Project excavations in the 1990’s.<sup>46</sup> Most of those coins were struck

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<sup>41</sup> It is rightly argued by Pilipko, Loginov 1980, 82, that type S26 follows S24. The monogram of the Rhaga mint was then modified, see Nikitin 1983, 96, fig. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Nikitin 1983, 96–978 suggests the period 115–110 B.C. for type S26.

<sup>43</sup> All the known coins from the hoard were of type S26, and one bore the monogram NI, short for Nisā/Nisaia. Originally, the hoard numbered about 70 drachms, but only eight were described in detail, see Pilipko, Loginov 1980.

<sup>44</sup> Pilipko 1976a.

<sup>45</sup> Almost all texts come from after 100 B.C. Cf. Bader 1996.

<sup>46</sup> Herrmann, Kurbansakhatov et al. 1994, 62; Smirnova 2007, 382–383.

in Rhaga and Nisa mints, but some specimens come from Merv. This means that the Parthian mint in Merv was working again. Mithradates II would have been wrong not to try to strengthen the defenses of Merv. Even earlier, under Mithradates I, the Parthians had reinforced Merv's defense walls.<sup>47</sup> But it was probably Mithradates II who made the most substantial contribution here as he bore in mind the turbulent years 130–119, when Parthia's eastern borders stood in flames. Merv continued to be a bastion of Parthian rule on the frontier of Iran and Central Asia, and still made an excellent base from which to launch Parthian attacks on Baktria and Sogdiana.

The above discussion proves that Mithradates' monetary production in ca. 122–111/110 concentrated in northern-Iranian centers: in Ekbatana, Rhaga, and to a lesser extent in Nisa and Merv. Rich Media, and also native Parthia as well as Margiana, became bases of operations for Mithradates II's great offensives in Central Asia.

Media, the richest land on the Iranian Plateau, played a decisive role in Parthian policies under Mithradates II.<sup>48</sup> Even under the Achaemenids, the Medes held a status nearly equal to that of the Persians. That was not only because of the affinity between the two tribes but also because of Media's imperial traditions and its riches, as many sources emphasize. Both linguistically and ethnically, the Medes and the Parthians had much in common; both nations were neighbors. Importantly, a record of Iustinus (41.1.1) says that the Parthian language was somewhere between Scythian and Median. Owing to its strategic, political, and economic potential, Media was of key importance to the Parthians and was subjected to their direct rule. Ekbatana was one of the Parthian empire's capitals (Strab. 11.13.1). Under Mithradates I (165–132), this city became the residence of a king's brother Bakasis (Bagaya'asa), controlling the western provinces of the Arsakid kingdom.<sup>49</sup> Median mints (Ekbatana and Rhaga) struck an overwhelming majority of Parthian drachms and the country possessed rich silver deposits.<sup>50</sup> Massive striking of Parthian coins in Media culminated under Mithradates II: the bulk of S23-S29 coins were produced in the Median centers. All this combined to make Media a land of exceptional importance to the Parthians, a land whose culture – a repository of old Iranian tradition as it was<sup>51</sup> – they amply drew from, also in their political ideology. It seems that the Arsakids from Mithradates I onwards reached back into the store of old Achaemenid traditions mainly through Median heritage.

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. Zavyalov 2007; Olbrycht 2010, 238.

<sup>48</sup> Media's wealth: Strab. 11.13, 7; Amm. Marc. 23.3.5; 23.6.29; 23.6.31.

<sup>49</sup> Olbrycht 2010, 238–239.

<sup>50</sup> Nikitin 1983.

<sup>51</sup> For more on this, see Olbrycht 1997. Cf. Koshelenko 1963, 64–65.

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## Abstract

Mithradates II (122–88/87 B.C.) is among the greatest Parthian kings, and because of his attainments, some ancient accounts call him “the Great.” Mithradates II rose to the throne after the unexpected death of his paternal uncle Artabanos I. In his early reign, Mithradates II routed a host of the “*Guti*,” i.e., Tochari, in Baktria, and managed to halt Arab raids in Babylonia. Faced with strong resistance from the Parthians under Artabanos I and Mithradates II, the Sakai wended their way south along the Areios (Harirud) and Margos (Morghab) into Drangiana and the Ariaspian land. Mithradates II pacified and included them in the Arsakid empire. Mithradates’ monetary production in ca. 122–111/110 concentrated in northern Iranian centers: in Ekbatana, Rhaga, and to a lesser extent in Nisa and Merv. Rich Media, and also native Parthia as well as Margiana, became bases of operations for Mithradates II’s great offensives in Central Asia.

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